Obama's Speech at AIPAC - June 4, 2008.html

It's great to see so many friends from across the country. I want to congratulate Howard Friedman, David Victor and Howard Kohr on a successful conference, and on the completion of a new headquarters just a few blocks away.

Before I begin, I want to say that I know some provocative e-mails have been circulating throughout Jewish communities across the country. A few of you may have gotten them. They're filled with tall tales and dire warnings about a certain candidate for president. And all I want to say is — let me know if you see this guy named Barack Obama, because he sounds pretty frightening.

But if anyone has been confused by these e-mails, I want you to know that today I'll be speaking from my heart, and as a true friend of Israel. And I know that when I visit with AIPAC, I am among friends. Good friends. Friends who share my strong commitment to make sure that the bond between the United States and Israel is unbreakable today, tomorrow and forever.

One of the many things that I admire about AIPAC is that you fight for this common cause from the bottom up. The lifeblood of AIPAC is here in this room — grass-roots activists of all ages, from all parts of the country, who come to Washington year after year to make your voices heard. Nothing reflects the face of AIPAC more than the 1,200 students who have traveled here to make it clear to the world that the bond between Israel and the United States is rooted in more than our shared national interests — it's rooted in the shared values and shared stories of our people. And as president, I will work with you to ensure that this bond is strengthened.

I first became familiar with the story of Israel when I was 11 years old. I learned of the long journey and steady determination of the Jewish people to preserve their identity through faith, family and culture. Year after year, century after century, Jews carried on their traditions, and their dream of a homeland, in the face of impossible odds.

The story made a powerful impression on me. I had grown up without a sense of roots. My father was black; he was from Kenya, and he left us when I was 2. My mother was white; she was from Kansas, and I'd moved with her to Indonesia and then back to Hawaii. In many ways, I didn't know where I came from. So I was drawn to the belief that you could sustain a spiritual, emotional and cultural identity. And I deeply understood the Zionist idea — that there is always a homeland at the center of our story.

I also learned about the horror of the Holocaust, and the terrible urgency it brought to the journey home to Israel. For much of my childhood, I lived with my grandparents. My grandfather had served in World War II, and so had my great-uncle. He was a Kansas boy who probably never expected to see Europe — let alone the horrors that awaited him there. And for months after he came home from Germany, he remained in a state of shock, alone with the painful memories that wouldn't leave his head.

You see, my great-uncle had been a part of the 89th Infantry Division — the first Americans to reach a Nazi concentration camp. They liberated Ohrdruf, part of Buchenwald, on an April day in 1945. The horrors of that camp go beyond our capacity to imagine. Tens of thousands died of hunger, torture, disease, or plain murder — part of the Nazi killing machine that killed 6 million people.

When the Americans marched in, they discovered huge piles of dead bodies and starving survivors. Gen. Eisenhower ordered Germans from the nearby town to tour the camp, so they could see what was being done in their name. He ordered American troops to tour the camp, so they could see the evil they were fighting against. He invited congressmen and journalists to bear witness. And he ordered that photographs and films be made. Explaining his actions, Eisenhower said that he wanted to produce "firsthand evidence of these things, if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to propaganda."

I saw some of those very images at Yad Vashem, and they never leave you. And those images just hint at the stories that survivors of the Shoah carried with them. Like Eisenhower, each of us bears witness to anyone and everyone who would deny these unspeakable crimes, or ever speak of repeating them. We must mean what we say when we speak the words "never again."

It was just a few years after the liberation of the camps that David Ben-Gurion declared the founding of the Jewish State of Israel. We know that the establishment of Israel was just and necessary, rooted in centuries of struggle and decades of patient work. But 60 years later, we know that we cannot relent, we cannot yield, and as president I will never compromise when it comes to Israel's security.

Not when there are still voices that deny the Holocaust. Not when there are terrorist groups and political leaders committed to Israel's destruction. Not when there are maps across the Middle East that don't even acknowledge Israel's existence, and government-funded textbooks filled with hatred toward Jews. Not when there are rockets raining down on Sderot, and Israeli children have to take a deep breath and summon uncommon courage every time they board a bus or walk to school.

I have long understood Israel's quest for peace and need for security. But never more so than during my travels there two years ago. Flying in an [Israeli Defense Forces] helicopter, I saw a narrow and beautiful strip of land nestled against the Mediterranean. On the ground, I met a family who saw their house destroyed by a Katyusha rocket. I spoke to Israeli troops who faced daily threats as they maintained security near the blue line. I talked to people who wanted nothing more simple, or elusive, than a secure future for their children.

I have been proud to be a part of a strong, bipartisan consensus that has stood by Israel in the face of all threats. That is a commitment that both John McCain and I share, because support for Israel in this country goes beyond party. But part of our commitment must be speaking up when Israel's security is at risk, and I don't think any of us can be satisfied that America's recent foreign policy has made Israel more secure.

Hamas now controls Gaza. Hezbollah has tightened its grip on southern Lebanon, and is flexing its muscles in Beirut. Because of the war in Iraq, Iran — which always posed a greater threat to Israel than Iraq — is emboldened and poses the greatest strategic challenge to the United States and Israel in the Middle East in a generation. Iraq is unstable, and al-Qaida has stepped up its recruitment. Israel's quest for peace with its neighbors has stalled, despite the heavy burdens borne by the Israeli people. And America is more isolated in the region, reducing our strength and jeopardizing Israel's safety.

The question is how to move forward. There are those who would continue and intensify this failed status quo, ignoring eight years of accumulated evidence that our foreign policy is dangerously flawed. And then there are those who would lay all of the problems of the Middle East at the doorstep of Israel and its supporters, as if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the root of all trouble in the region. These voices blame the Middle East's only democracy for the region's extremism. They offer the false promise that abandoning a stalwart ally is somehow the path to strength. It is not, it never has been, and it never will be.

Our alliance is based on shared interests and shared values. Those who threaten Israel threaten us. Israel has always faced these threats on the front lines. And I will bring to the White House an unshakeable commitment to Israel's security.

That starts with ensuring Israel's qualitative military advantage. I will ensure that Israel can defend itself from any threat — from Gaza to Tehran. Defense cooperation between the United States and Israel is a model of success, and must be deepened. As president, I will implement a Memorandum of Understanding that provides $30 billion in assistance to Israel over the next decade — investments to Israel's security that will not be tied to any other nation. First, we must approve the foreign aid request for 2009. Going forward, we can enhance our cooperation on missile defense. We should export military equipment to our ally Israel under the same guidelines as NATO. And I will always stand up for Israel's right to defend itself in the United Nations and around the world.

Across the political spectrum, Israelis understand that real security can only come through lasting peace. And that is why we — as friends of Israel — must resolve to do all we can to help Israel and its neighbors to achieve it. Because a secure, lasting peace is in Israel's national interest. It is in America's national interest. And it is in the interest of the Palestinian people and the Arab world. As president, I will work to help Israel achieve the goal of two states, a Jewish state of Israel and a Palestinian state, living side by side in peace and security. And I won't wait until the waning days of my presidency. I will take an active role, and make a personal commitment to do all I can to advance the cause of peace from the start of my administration.

The long road to peace requires Palestinian partners committed to making the journey. We must isolate Hamas unless and until they renounce terrorism, recognize Israel's right to exist, and abide by past agreements. There is no room at the negotiating table for terrorist organizations. That is why I opposed holding elections in 2006 with Hamas on the ballot. The Israelis and the Palestinian Authority warned us at the time against holding these elections. But this administration pressed ahead, and the result is a Gaza controlled by Hamas, with rockets raining down on Israel.

The Palestinian people must understand that progress will not come through the false prophets of extremism or the corrupt use of foreign aid. The United States and the international community must stand by Palestinians who are committed to cracking down on terror and carrying the burden of peacemaking. I will strongly urge Arab governments to take steps to normalize relations with Israel, and to fulfill their responsibility to pressure extremists and provide real support for President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad. Egypt must cut off the smuggling of weapons into Gaza. Israel can also advance the cause of peace by taking appropriate steps — consistent with its security — to ease the freedom of movement for Palestinians, improve economic conditions in the West Bank, and to refrain from building new settlements — as it agreed to with the Bush administration at Annapolis.

Let me be clear. Israel's security is sacrosanct. It is non-negotiable. The Palestinians need a state that is contiguous and cohesive, and that allows them to prosper — but any agreement with the Palestinian people must preserve Israel's identity as a Jewish state, with secure, recognized and defensible borders. Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided.

I have no illusions that this will be easy. It will require difficult decisions on both sides. But Israel is strong enough to achieve peace, if it has partners who are committed to the goal. Most Israelis and Palestinians want peace, and we must strengthen their hand. The United States must be a strong and consistent partner in this process — not to force concessions, but to help committed partners avoid stalemate and the kind of vacuums that are filled by violence. That's what I commit to do as president of the United States.

The threats to Israel start close to home, but they don't end there. Syria continues its support for terror and meddling in Lebanon. And Syria has taken dangerous steps in pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, which is why Israeli action was justified to end that threat.

I also believe that the United States has a responsibility to support Israel's efforts to renew peace talks with the Syrians. We must never force Israel to the negotiating table, but neither should we ever block negotiations when Israel's leaders decide that they may serve Israeli interests. As president, I will do whatever I can to help Israel succeed in these negotiations. And success will require the full enforcement of Security Council Resolution 1701 in Lebanon, and a stop to Syria's support for terror. It is time for this reckless behavior to come to an end.

There is no greater threat to Israel — or to the peace and stability of the region — than Iran. Now this audience is made up of both Republicans and Democrats, and the enemies of Israel should have no doubt that, regardless of party, Americans stand shoulder to shoulder in our commitment to Israel's security. So while I don't want to strike too partisan a note here today, I do want to address some willful mischaracterizations of my positions.

The Iranian regime supports violent extremists and challenges us across the region. It pursues a nuclear capability that could spark a dangerous arms race and raise the prospect of a transfer of nuclear know-how to terrorists. Its president denies the Holocaust and threatens to wipe Israel off the map. The danger from Iran is grave, it is real, and my goal will be to eliminate this threat.

But just as we are cleareyed about the threat, we must be clear about the failure of today's policy. We knew, in 2002, that Iran supported terrorism. We knew Iran had an illicit nuclear program. We knew Iran posed a grave threat to Israel. But instead of pursuing a strategy to address this threat, we ignored it and instead invaded and occupied Iraq. When I opposed the war, I warned that it would fan the flames of extremism in the Middle East. That is precisely what happened in Iran — the hard-liners tightened their grip, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005. And the United States and Israel are less secure.

I respect Sen. McCain, and look forward to a substantive debate with him these next five months. But on this point, we have differed, and we will differ. Sen. McCain refuses to understand or acknowledge the failure of the policy that he would continue. He criticizes my willingness to use strong diplomacy but offers only an alternate reality — one where the war in Iraq has somehow put Iran on its heels. The truth is the opposite. Iran has strengthened its position. Iran is now enriching uranium and has reportedly stockpiled 150 kilos of low enriched uranium. Its support for terrorism and threats toward Israel have increased. Those are the facts, they cannot be denied, and I refuse to continue a policy that has made the United States and Israel less secure.

Sen. McCain offers a false choice: stay the course in Iraq, or cede the region to Iran. I reject this logic because there is a better way. Keeping all of our troops tied down indefinitely in Iraq is not the way to weaken Iran — it is precisely what has strengthened it. It is a policy for staying, not a plan for victory. I have proposed a responsible, phased redeployment of our troops from Iraq. We will get out as carefully as we were careless getting in. We will finally pressure Iraq's leaders to take meaningful responsibility for their own future.

We will also use all elements of American power to pressure Iran. I will do everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. That starts with aggressive, principled diplomacy without self-defeating preconditions, but with a cleareyed understanding of our interests. We have no time to waste. We cannot unconditionally rule out an approach that could prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. We have tried limited, piecemeal talks while we outsource the sustained work to our European allies. It is time for the United States to lead.

There will be careful preparation. We will open up lines of communication, build an agenda, coordinate closely with our allies, and evaluate the potential for progress. Contrary to the claims of some, I have no interest in sitting down with our adversaries just for the sake of talking. But as president of the United States, I would be willing to lead tough and principled diplomacy with the appropriate Iranian leader at a time and place of my choosing — if, and only if, it can advance the interests of the United States.

Only recently have some come to think that diplomacy by definition cannot be tough. They forget the example of Truman, and Kennedy and Reagan. These presidents understood that diplomacy backed by real leverage was a fundamental tool of statecraft. And it is time to once again make American diplomacy a tool to succeed, not just a means of containing failure. We will pursue this diplomacy with no illusions about the Iranian regime. Instead, we will present a clear choice. If you abandon your dangerous nuclear program, support for terror, and threats to Israel, there will be meaningful incentives — including the lifting of sanctions, and political and economic integration with the international community. If you refuse, we will ratchet up the pressure.

My presidency will strengthen our hand as we restore our standing. Our willingness to pursue diplomacy will make it easier to mobilize others to join our cause. If Iran fails to change course when presented with this choice by the United States, it will be clear — to the people of Iran, and to the world — that the Iranian regime is the author of its own isolation. That will strengthen our hand with Russia and China as we insist on stronger sanctions in the Security Council. And we should work with Europe, Japan and the Gulf states to find every avenue outside the U.N. to isolate the Iranian regime — from cutting off loan guarantees and expanding financial sanctions, to banning the export of refined petroleum to Iran, to boycotting firms associated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, whose Quds force has rightly been labeled a terrorist organization.

I was interested to see Sen. McCain propose divestment as a source of leverage — not the bigoted divestment that has sought to punish Israeli scientists and academics, but divestment targeted at the Iranian regime. It's a good concept, but not a new one. I introduced legislation over a year ago that would encourage states and the private sector to divest from companies that do business in Iran. This bill has bipartisan support, but for reasons that I'll let him explain, Sen. McCain never signed on. Meanwhile, an anonymous senator is blocking the bill. It is time to pass this into law so that we can tighten the squeeze on the Iranian regime. We should also pursue other unilateral sanctions that target Iranian banks and assets.

And we must free ourselves from the tyranny of oil. The price of a barrel of oil is one of the most dangerous weapons in the world. Petrodollars pay for weapons that kill American troops and Israeli citizens. And the Bush administration's policies have driven up the price of oil, while its energy policy has made us more dependent on foreign oil and gas. It's time for the United States to take real steps to end our addiction to oil. And we can join with Israel, building on last year's U.S.-Israel Energy Cooperation Act, to deepen our partnership in developing alternative sources of energy by increasing scientific collaboration and joint research and development. The surest way to increase our leverage in the long term is to stop bankrolling the Iranian regime.

Finally, let there be no doubt: I will always keep the threat of military action on the table to defend our security and our ally Israel. Sometimes there are no alternatives to confrontation. But that only makes diplomacy more important. If we must use military force, we are more likely to succeed, and will have far greater support at home and abroad, if we have exhausted our diplomatic efforts.

That is the change we need in our foreign policy. Change that restores American power and influence. Change accompanied by a pledge that I will make known to allies and adversaries alike: that America maintains an unwavering friendship with Israel, and an unshakeable commitment to its security.

As members of AIPAC, you have helped advance this bipartisan consensus to support and defend our ally Israel. And I am sure that today on Capitol Hill you will be meeting with members of Congress and spreading the word. But we are here because of more than policy. We are here because the values we hold dear are deeply embedded in the story of Israel.

Just look at what Israel has accomplished in 60 years. From decades of struggle and the terrible wake of the Holocaust, a nation was forged to provide a home for Jews from all corners of the world — from Syria to Ethiopia to the Soviet Union. In the face of constant threats, Israel has triumphed. In the face of constant peril, Israel has prospered. In a state of constant insecurity, Israel has maintained a vibrant and open discourse, and a resilient commitment to the rule of law.

As any Israeli will tell you, Israel is not a perfect place, but like the United States it sets an example for all when it seeks a more perfect future. These same qualities can be found among American Jews. It is why so many Jewish Americans have stood by Israel, while advancing the American story. Because there is a commitment embedded in the Jewish faith and tradition: to freedom and fairness; to social justice and equal opportunity. To tikkun olam — the obligation to repair this world.

I will never forget that I would not be standing here today if it weren't for that commitment. In the great social movements in our country's history, Jewish and African Americans have stood shoulder to shoulder. They took buses down south together. They marched together. They bled together. And Jewish Americans like Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were willing to die alongside a black man — James Chaney — on behalf of freedom and equality.

Their legacy is our inheritance. We must not allow the relationship between Jews and African Americans to suffer. This is a bond that must be strengthened. Together, we can rededicate ourselves to end prejudice and combat hatred in all of its forms. Together, we can renew our commitment to justice. Together, we can join our voices together, and in doing so make even the mightiest of walls fall down.

That work must include our shared commitment to Israel. You and I know that we must do more than stand still. Now is the time to be vigilant in facing down every foe, just as we move forward in seeking a future of peace for the children of Israel, and for all children. Now is the time to stand by Israel as it writes the next chapter in its extraordinary journey. Now is the time to join together in the work of repairing this world.